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A BIG BUSINESS-ENGLISH PROJECT

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Other teachers of English may be interested in a method which I tried last year for teaching business English to a class of thirty-two students in the high school at Ellensburg, Washington. Those permitted to enroll in this course were regular Sophomores and boys from different classes who were specializing in vocational training. We introduced, as a part of the work, a laboratory period conducted in a manner similar to that of an experimental science.

The course began with the customary review of principles of construction, elements requisite to good use, and discussions of form letters and documents. After two weeks of such work the laboratory period was introduced. This was scheduled immediately following the recitation. The first experimental project was the preparation of a chart to show the percentage of tardiness of the local high school in comparison with the records of thirty-two other high schools. Each student wrote to the principal of some western high school of approximately the same size, explaining the class project, and requesting the necessary information. While writing these letters, pupils were permitted to converse, exchange ideas, and look up information. After a draft had been submitted for the instructor's criticism, each letter was re-written and mailed. When the replies came, they furnished the basis for class discussions. Then the students arranged the data as a chart, posted copies in conspicuous places throughout the building, and gave talks in assembly and in the various rooms. Not only did this provide experience in public speaking, but the device served to raise the school's percentage of punctuality.

After a few other similar experiments, the class undertook a more ambitious project—the compiling of statistics for a state vocational needs survey. This entailed the mailing of approximately four thousand letters, with questionnaires and information

sheets enclosed, and the filing, checking, and summarizing of the returns. I explained to the students that they must solicit the co-operation of every school district in the state in an effort to determine the occupations of the populace. The detailed solution of the problem I left to the class.

The pupils began by studying a wall map of the state. Each one then assumed responsibility for a county, sparsely populated counties being grouped, in order to equalize the work. The first letters composed in connection with this project were mailed to county superintendents with a request for mailing lists of teachers and county maps. If replies seemed unduly delayed, other original composition was afforded in sending follow-up letters. Meanwhile, the class drafted form letters and prepared questionnaires. In their laboratory period they experimented daily and finally produced a very gratifying questionnaire which recorded fifty occupations for rural districts and towns with a population less than five thousand. The commercial department co-operated by furnishing a sufficient number of mimeographed copies of this literature.

As soon as a county mailing list came, the students, directed by the one who had assumed responsibility for the county under consideration, filled in the addresses for the form letters, signed them, and sent them out, enclosing with each a return envelope, questionnaire, and the sheet of information. This information was the only material prepared by the instructor. Even these data had originally been drafted by the students, but they were found insufficiently experienced to furnish the final sheet. As additional mailing lists came, the members of the class formed themselves into groups, thus making it possible for several counties to receive attention at the same time. Two kinds of form letters accompanied the first questionnaires; one type was sent to rural districts, and the other to principals or superintendents of incorporated towns.

The small districts reached, we made a new questionnaire asking for the number of employees in one hundred occupations; likewise, the class drafted a new form letter to be used only as a model. The letters actually sent were personal communications to the city superintendents. These communications went to all cities with a population of five thousand or over except the largest eight cities, to which I gave my personal attention.

In order to check the accuracy of the data, each student wrote a letter to the secretary of some state commission, board of examiners, railway superintendent, industrial or commercial organization. These original letters appealed to practically all sources of information, of the types just suggested, in the state. Next, each student had another opportunity for individual composition when he selected the name of some prominent business man, or official, to whom he wrote explaining the class project and soliciting an indorsement or opinion. Every state official whose work would be affected by the survey statistics received an appeal and responded by heartily indorsing the undertaking.

As the replies came in, the students kept letter files where they arranged the questionnaires alphabetically according to counties. There was also a separate file for recording general correspondence relative to the survey, and here were kept duplicates of all outgoing letters except, of course, the mimeographed forms. References, lists of districts to which follow-up letters must be sent, and tabulations were all filed according to the card system. As I appointed different students each week to attend to this part of the work, all of the class eventually became familiar with the filing systems. Many suggestions came from observation of file numbers on communications from large corporations.

The work as here outlined occupied the class during twelve weeks. I have never found more enthusiastic students. Although but one laboratory period was required for the practice work, much more time was voluntarily devoted. After the first week, this period conducted itself in so orderly a manner that I was able to teach a small class in literature at the same time in the same room, an arrangement frequently necessary in a small-town high school. The business-English students worked at the back of the room, talked their problems over as quietly as possible, and when they met some unusual difficulty, presented it for my help. However, the literature recitation was rarely interrupted more than two or three times, and then very briefly.

Each of the pupils felt that his individual responsibility was the determining factor affecting the class enterprise. He realized also that every communication sent out with his signature was not only a means of determining his personal ability but must react

favorably or unfavorably toward his school. It was surprising to see how often a student who would have been satisfied with mediocre work on his own account volunteered to re-write a letter when reminded that his school was equally concerned. This appeal was especially effective regarding letters to a rival high school, and for that reason I appointed the careless pupils to handle communications to the schools where the rivalry was keenest.

Such practice as this made the pupil feel as if he were an employee of his school. As such, it brought to him some realization of the responsibilities of employees in all capacities. Logically, then, it was easy to impress some of the duties of the business world and the necessity for accuracy and dependability as prerequisites to efficiency.

Out of the class of thirty-two I selected eight students who could be trusted to inspect every communication before mailing. With their aid, errors disappeared rapidly and the elimination of technical mistakes was very gratifying.

The results of this venture may be stated briefly as follows: It vitalized the work of the class by stimulating the interest and activity of the students, all of whom realized the practicability of their study and, likewise, their individual responsibility toward the enterprise. I am confident that these pupils would have rebelled at the requirements of the course—the close application, the large amount of original written work, and the unusual emphasis of technicalities—had the training been acquired by traditional methods.

It proved the source of favorable comment for the school, as expressed in the appreciation of officials and organizations for the work being attempted. This approval was such that the school board felt justified in financing the undertaking, since they considered that the co-operation secured throughout the state compensated the expenditure.

Finally, it assembled valuable material from which data will be incorporated as the foundation statistics for a bulletin concerning vocational needs of the state.